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ABSTRACT

Discussion of the current student malaise toward foreign literature and reading problems encountered by college students is directed toward means of making college language programs more relevant and of updating teaching methods. Student disinterest is traced to a premature and excessive overexposure to electronic media. The author proposes a combined synchronic and diachronic approach to literary anthologies while stressing reading development without the use of a dictionary. (RL)

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Reading Problems and
Teaching Literature in Foreign Languages

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Much has been written about the reading problem which affects so many students. Everyone agrees upon its existence but not on its solution. There are perhaps many, although they may be of little use in actual situations when students complain at the beginning of the semester that they cannot read every other day thirty pages of a fairly easy book written in the language that they are studying.

What is going to be suggested in this paper is not new, but applied in such circumstances it has again and again brought about results and hence perhaps should be of general usefulness. There are fancier ways, but remedial reading courses are not always available, nor does the student always have the time or the money to enroll in one. Furthermore, these are taught in English, and reading in a foreign language may not present the same problems or obstacles as reading in one's own language. When the student complains, something has to be done immediately or he will lose interest in, as well as the benefit of, the course that he is in the process of taking.

Although students come from different backgrounds, in Colorado or Wyoming one can expect to have a class of thirty, none of whom have ever been out of the state, to the West, or the East coast, much less abroad, apart from a few veterans or undergraduates whose families had settled abroad in the aftermath of World War II and who are now of college age. Few or none have ever heard the language spoken by a native, whereas in Alaska, for example, Eskimos and Athabascan Indians, living in Jesuit territory, have learned not only English but also Latin and in college one or two other foreign languages. All to the same result. If their

general knowledge of the language taught was shaky, their reading aloud was unmentionable: wrong pitch, wrong stress, wrong speed, and wrong accent. Left to themselves they could not manage thirty pages with a reasonable time. To teach them to read, in order to understand the general meaning of the story and in order to be able to talk about it, was imperious. Reading can be of interest and pleasurable even in the context of a classroom situation. But it is none of those things if one has labored through the evening, word for word, plodding one's way through and still not knowing what it is all about or without seeing what the general outline or theme of the story is.

The problem of how to read and what to read are closely related. And even if one does manage to improve upon one's reading skill, if the material given is totally unrelated to the student's interest, there is no hope of sustaining the student's attention and output. These problems have to be solved in view of each other.

If after World War II universities went slightly overboard and imposed foreign language courses on one and all, the dwindling interest in the discipline which resulted is to be sorely regretted today. What brought about this state of affairs and what can be learned from it or what can be done, if anything, to try and remedy the situation are the questions which need to be answered.

It is usually taken for granted that a knowledge of foreign languages fits into the background of an educated man. But does this still apply, or is the educational system actually providing what is necessary to permit the average student to achieve such a goal and to "get something"

from those years of grappling with spelling, syntax, stylistics, and literature?

This question should be answered by an emphatic no. The problem is huge. Students lack interest, motivation, or cannot relate to such and such a text--or so they say. Literature bores them, and grammar does not provide a certified recipe for speaking and writing the language . . . so why are we studying all this? . . . The problem perhaps goes back to our elementary schools. Ideally, the student's basic skills should have been learned and drilled at the junior high school level for two years, and then should have been further developed through introduction to literature during the last two years of high school. Then arriving at the university level, the freshman who is interested in languages, either as his major field of study or as an adjunct to his general studies, could start immediately at the third-year level. Here of course there would be some grammar review, some composition and stylistics, but mostly there would be an emphasis on literature: discussions of the works read and of the culture in which these works were written. Then when the student graduates from college, whether he has had two years or more, he will be able to speak, to write, and to read reasonably well the language that he has studied.

But what is the actual situation today? Often students attend one year of Spanish, then take one semester of French, then switch to another language including perhaps one semester of German and graduating without having learned anything. They may likewise follow through with one language for several semesters under the supervision of an ill-prepared

or indifferent instructor and learn nothing. At the college level, starting as a freshman, students may have to repeat beginner courses --a tedious process to say the least--and by their sophomore year are thoroughly fed up with languages. They have lost their incentive and the habit of working hard (as they already had some knowledge of the language and can sail by with very little effort). Furthermore, many students cannot read, or write, or speak the language that they have studied. And very soon they will lose what little skill they have acquired. Is it the fault of the student, of the system, or the fault of the instructor?

Two of the basic errors in the present system go back to two different misconceptions. First, there is an antideluvian approach to literature: since certain books were taught in the 1850 curriculum in French schools, they must be read today--in American--now in 1972 on the eve of the twenty-first century. Secondly, the present methods of teaching foreign languages are based too much on those used during World War II in military language schools. And this approach assumes that what was good for the highly motivated military man will also suit the average student--thirty years later--sitting in a university classroom.

Obviously the student of today is not as motivated as was the military man in quite different and highly emotional environment of the last world war. Furthermore, the student is pulled apart by too many interests. The atmosphere on campus is different; he has a social life to attend to in addition to the many other courses that he must take,

while the military school student was steeped not only in the language but also in the culture he was studying twenty four hours a day. The high school or university student is also shown a number of movies in language classes, often unrelated and boring, and he may be made to sing children's songs--out of context--quite unrelated to his mood, age, mind, and state of development. Are freshmen in English courses required to sing Three Blind Mice? Is this necessary in order to give him a feeling of foreign culture in which ever language he is studying?

Having begun the language in college, or reviewing it due to having been ill-prepared in high school, the student arrives at the end of his second year still incapable of reading proficiently. A book of average length or difficulty takes him forever to read: in fact, he does not even know how to read in any language. Perhaps it is most important that he should be taught the skill at this time and given some time to practice it. The basic skills, having been covered during the first year, should be reviewed and enlarged during the second year. The latter should also take as its goal teaching the student how to read--particularly in the second and the third semesters of studies. This can be accomplished by having the student read from five or six books during each semester. During classes simple questions should be asked as the book is discussed, with the instructor adding something about the author, the genre, the story itself and elucidating any questions which might arise (vocabulary, plot, ideas, themes, etc.). The student will be learning many things and will be able to discuss something other than the weather or Christmas. He will be introduced on a very elementary

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level to story analysis, to literary vocabulary and, even more important, to reading skills. He will have acquired a dictionary--a bilingual one (and for the French student Le petit Larousse illustré as well).

Too often the instructor assumes that the students know more than they do. In turn the students do not want to parade their doubts or their ignorance and already lost, compound the situation for the lack of asking for a few directive which should have been given as part of the introductory remarks to the course. What will be suggested to remedy to the situation is so obvious, that too often it is overlooked. It is the result of common sense, experience and concern for, and understanding of the student and his problems. It will bring results if the student persevere on his own. The method, if there is one, is based upon the fact that knowledge is cumulative. It is easier to relate the unknown to the known and applying these principles to reading skills, one can see that through a successive series of reading of the same passage one can build up one's understanding of it to the point where the general meaning of it becomes clear. Furthermore this will be a stepping stone towards the understanding of the next passage until the whole book is read and comprehended. It helps to understand "in the whole" and give to the student the satisfaction of having read a whole book and of knowing what it is all about: a step of utmost importance in generating enthusiasm and self-confidence.

The student comes equipped with a desire to learn, a basic vocabulary and a basic knowledge of grammar. These should be sufficient to permit him to grasp the general meaning of a passage at a first reading. Any

further reading of the same passage should increase his understanding, as what he has understood further on in the passage should help to clarify the beginning of it. The difficulty comes, in part, from the fact that very few students believe in the necessity to read a book or a chapter more than once. Those who do, will be rewarded with a swift improvement in their skill.

Four to six books to read in fourteen weeks (more-or-less) is a difficult task for a beginner who also has other courses and functions which he must attend. A book should be read in about two weeks--an average of thirty pages or so per lesson. It should not be read word for word, with the dictionary at the student's fingertips: he should read the thirty pages assigned once without any help from the dictionary. At the end of the reading he should then ask himself what the passage is about. He should be able to get something out of it which will serve him as a guideline for the second reading. The second reading should proceed as did the first one but, instead of reading the whole passage, the student should proceed paragraph by paragraph, asking himself questions after each one (what is happening, who did what, etc.). Whatever he understood from the first reading should help him to catch on to things that had previously escaped him. This second reading is also the time when the student should be underlining words to ask about in class, look up in the dictionary, or simply mark as new words in order to build up his vocabulary. Having arrived at the end of the assigned passage for the second time, he should then reread it sentence by sentence. And then, and only then, should he produce his dictionary, although the cu-

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cumulative knowledge acquired during the previous readings should render its use almost unnecessary except for a very small number of words. Each assignment should become and does become easier and faster. By the time the student finishes his third or fourth book a difference in his achievement should be noticed, and by the fifth or sixth book the reading should be much easier and much faster, and he should be able to comprehend more and more with each first reading. Once this skill is acquired it should be cultivated in other courses, and soon the student will be able to see at once what is important, what is to be retained, what to select, and what is of secondary importance or can even be neglected or forgotten.

Paperback collections offer a good choice of books, classical as well as modern. Their cost is relatively low and permits the students to buy four or five for a course: a novel or two, a play, a volume of short stories and a selection of modern poetry. This has the advantage of presenting an introduction into different genres.

A good choice of books should be one that is pertinent to the interest and problems of today's students. They should not be too long; should have a sustaining interest as well as that old-fashioned attribute --a plot or intrigue. In French the following should be highly recommended:

La Symphonie pastorale by Gide; Thérèse Desqueyroux by Mauriac; Gigi and Chéri by Collette; Maria Chapdelaine by Hémon; and Marius and Fanny by Pagnol, Becket by Anouilh, Les Enfants terribles, by Cocteau, Bonjour Tristesse by Sagan. These have been tried, and it has been found that they are read with relish and provoke interesting discussions. None of these were written before World War I. Neither do they deal with exis-

tentialism or angoisse nor do they show any characteristics of the nouveau roman. Many other works can be chosen, such as some of the novels by African authors. Les bouts de bois de Dieu, by Ousmane or l'Enfant noir, by Laye should be included.

Such a course, then, is useful to the major, but it is also attractive to others who are interested only in the language, culture, or literature and take the course as an elective or a fulfillment of their humanities requirement. It may even cause a student to declare a major in the language that he is studying, or at least cause him to pursue it another semester or so beyond the required courses. It does, then, fulfill a double need: teaching the majors to read and attracting or maintaining the interest of non-majors--something which is not to be neglected these days.

The reading problem having been hopefully taken care of during the first three or four semesters of the foreign language, what then is the cause of the dislike for these courses? Satiated too early by a steady diet of comics, TV romances, and too much of too many things too early, the student is bored. What can the student of today find in the reading of Boileau or Malesherbes? He does not care about the beauty and the defense of the English language, judging by his compositions, so why would he be moved by the problems that the French had with their own language? The reading of the encyclopedia (eighteenth century), to the contemporary student, is not even funny; Voltaire's tragedies, Pascal, and Descartes are boring and leave the student, at best, indifferent. It is true that the history of thought and of literature cannot be

taught without including these authors, but is it necessary to oblige students to read lengthy passages and discuss them when the student obviously neither knows nor cares what they are all about?

Anthologies are boring. Students find them so and they cannot be blamed. Very few passages can be meaningful when taken out of the context of the whole work, and passages from the above-mentioned writers are very dry and without relationship to a young American of the 1970's. It seems that the interest in the understanding of a work is promoted by reading it in its entirety.

Anthologies are dull and to the student many classics appear to be so, for it sometimes takes a greater motivation, understanding, and wider background as well as a compassionate knowledge of man to develop an affinity to them.

On the other hand, anthologies are useful and needed. The question is how to use them. Does one need to go through them page by page, or would it not be preferable to thumb one's way through, while making the course rest on a series of either complete works of certain authors or on editions of these works out of which certain perhaps dull or extraneous passages have been judiciously culled (such as the *Classique Larousse* editions). Madame de Clèves, La nouvelle Héloïse fare well in this respect especially at the undergraduate level.

Combining the use of an anthology as a handy reference book and as a source of indispensable passages from long and perhaps dull works of certain authors (an important passage from Descartes, or a few major verses from Boileau), with the reading of six or ten judiciously chosen

works which would clarify not only the position of their authors but also explain the evolution of the political, economic, and literary movement of the century studied as well as the position of the most forebearing authors. Through lectures and comments the instructor could tie together the works by weaving through them a conducting thread and the students would perhaps remember something whereas, had the anthology been the only work consulted, they would remember nothing or very little of the patches and squares that have been dabbled at.

Through a judiciously-chosen selection of Voltaire's contes, of Prévost, Rousseau, Diderot, Laclos, Bernardin de St. Pierre, Montesquieu, and Marivaux, the whole evolution of the 18th century can be illustrated and the position of the encyclopedists, Bayle, d'Alembert, and others, explained without painfully plodding through passages that are neither understood by, nor interesting to, students today.

There are many works--some major, some not--in French, and no doubt in other modern languages, which are as pertinent today as they were yesterday and which can be taught and at least interest (if not fascinate) the student and give him an appreciation of literature, of the evolution of human thought, and in the end perhaps a deeper understanding of himself. He then will not have wasted his time, and perhaps someday he will pick up a book with enjoyment and be able to delve into the more obscure or dreary authors in the original, should he want or need them for his course of study or for his own pleasure. While a diachronic approach in teaching literature is indispensable, it could be made much more pertinent to the student by combining it with a synchronic one as well. This would bring

a great deal more meaning to the past as well as to the present and in the end to the authors and their works. To the Aquarius generation Madame Bovary is a square.